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Rivalries hurt fight for south

CIA betrayed me, Pastora contends

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SAN JOSE, Costa Rica — Eden Pastora is trying to explain how the CIA forced him to abandon his war against the Nicaraguan government, but for the third time in 20 minutes, his weakened frame bolts upright and he dashes from

THE CONTRAS

POLICY AT A CROSSROADS

Third of four parts

his metal cot to vomit in the bathroom.

The graying rebel, three days into a hunger strike, lies down and stares again at his interviewer through pained, tired eyes.

"Tomorrow will be worse," he says. Looking at the charismatic guerrilla leader's deadened expression in the gray light of his dormitory-cell at a civil guard barracks, that is difficult to imagine.

Three years after Pastora and a group of Costa Rica-based comrades set out to form a southern front in the battle against Nicaragua's Sandinista government, their dreams of triumph appear to have been dashed.

Pastora's soldiers, who once had footholds in several outposts along the San Juan River and ranged freely through the sparsely populated swamps and cattle lands to the north, have been driven from the river and face ever stronger pursuit by Sandinista troops.

Another contra army, the Nicaraguan Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARN), which had been in the field two years before Pastora took up the cause and receives U.S. aid, continues the fight. But it has never had more than 500 soldiers and recruiters say they are having difficulty keeping men at the battlefront.

And Pastora, the only anti-Sandinista leader ever seen as a hero inside Nicaragua, has quit. In a tragicomic ceremony last month, he and 159 of his fighters turned their weapons over to Costa Rican authorities. Pastora was granted political asylum by Costa Rican authorities after he broke off a five-day hunger strike that had only served to anger them.

Personality conflicts, power struggles, poor organization and incompetence all have contributed to the failure to form an effective front against the Sandinistas in southern Nicaragua.

But Pastora followers — and some of their rivals — pin most of the blame on U.S. officials whose determination to tightly control the contra war placed them in conflict with the fiercely independent, mercurial — some say flaky — Pastora. In the end, rebel sources say, it was a successful CIA plot to lure Pastora's commanders to FARN that forced Pastora to give up the armed struggle.

With Pastora out of the way, the leaders of the U.S.-backed United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO), a coalition of contra groups, foresee a renewed southern front, a supply network shared with the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), which fights in the north from bases in Honduras, and coordinated attacks in Nicaragua from both borders.

But even Pastora's detractors acknowledge that with his "retirement," the anti-Sandinista cause has lost the only commander whose one-time popularity was seen as a magnet for disaffected Nicaraguans.

"Pastora at least wasn't an invention of the Yankees," said one former contra leader.

Pastora's defection from the Sandinista government in 1981 seemed to be heaven-sent for U.S. architects of the contra war. In September 1978, he staged a spectacular raid on the Nicaraguan National Assembly, holding 1,200 people hostage until President Anastasio Somoza agreed to free about 50 jailed Sandinista leaders, turn over $500,000 to the rebels and provide a plane to freedom.

Help from CIA

Pastora formed the Revolutionary Democratic Alliance (ARDE) with other prominent Sandinista defectors, including business leader Alfonso Robelo, who had served on the first revolutionary junta. The United States provided what Pastora later estimated was several million dollars in CIA aid. Military operations began in March 1983, and the war expanded quickly.

In September 1983, ARDE planes fired rockets at a communications center at the Managua airport, causing millions of dollars in damage, and staged another raid on the port of Corinto while a Soviet ship was unloading supplies.

By the end of the year, Pastora claimed to command 4,000 men — probably an exaggeration. But other, independent sources said at the time that as many as 3,000 Nicaraguans had defected to Costa Rica and were eagerly awaiting arms to join Pastora's troops. He was reported to control seven villages and his men roamed freely for hundreds of miles.

In April 1984, Pastora's troops, with CIA ships offshore bombarding Sandinista positions, overpowered a Sandinista army garrison at San Juan del Norte on the Atlantic coast, and held the town for two days before a fierce Sandinista counterattack forced them out. It was the closest anti-Sandinista troops have ever come to holding a significant Nicaraguan town.

At that time, some Sandinista commanders say, Pastora's troops were seen as a greater threat than the much larger FDN in the north.

But Pastora had problems. His alliance remained a fractious bunch beset by constant quarreling over strategy, power and whether to join an alliance with the FDN. FARN joined forces with ARDE, then pulled out of the alliance almost as combat was beginning in March 1983.

Sandinista spies

The alliance was wracked with Sandinista infiltrators at every level. Perhaps the most celebrated was a woman Pastora knew — intimately, his aides say — as "Nancy." According to one ARDE leader, she "went everywhere with Eden."

Her real name, Marielos Serrano Guillen, came out in Managua headlines in August 1984. A Sandinista state security agent

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who had become one of Pastora's "personal team," she was the center of attention at the so-called Anti-Somocista Tribunals, giving names, dates, places and addresses she had diligently recorded over the previous two years.

Most important, Pastora angered and frustrated his CIA handlers. For a year before ARDE troops were in the field, the CIA had pressed Pastora to join forces with the FDN. But Pastora adamantly refused, claiming that the FDN's top officers, most of whom had served in Somoza's brutal National Guard, were hated by the Nicaraguan people. Others said Pastora simply didn't want to share the leadership of the contra cause.

By April 1984, the CIA had cut Pastora off.

One Pastora aide said he realized the relationship had gone sour when ARDE fighters received what was to be a planeload of CIA war supplies. The boxes that came floating down at the prearranged drop spot contained not boots and ammunition but beans, rice and what appeared to be a lifetime supply of sanitary napkins.

"Many more sanitary napkins than the female comrades needed," the aide recalled.

Pastora traces the CIA campaign to cut him out of the contra movement to May 30, 1984, when a bomb exploded at a Pastora press conference, killing four and wounding two dozen more, including Pastora. The bomber's identity has never been established.

Pastora went to Venezuela to recover from burns, returning weeks later to a fierce internal power struggle. Alfonso Robelo, the former Sandinista junta member, left ARDE in July, exasperated with Pastora's continued refusal to join forces with the FDN.

Pastora scraped to continue the fight and supported his men on handouts for a year, spitting epithets in response to periodic peace offers from the FDN. Finally, the CIA began trying to persuade his deputies to split from Pastora.

Pressure to oust Pastora

As Congress moved to approve a $27 million aid package last June, UNO was formed, in part to channel the funding. Rebels say it was then that agents from the CIA's station in San Jose approached Pastora's operations chief, Adolfo "Popo" Chamorro, and other ARDE officials about receiving U.S. aid.

The condition, rebels involved in the contacts said, was always the same: Pastora had to be moved out.

In July of last year, Chamorro met in Washington with Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North, a senior National Security Council staffer who, according to U.S. officials, has served as a key manager of the contra program since the CIA was barred from directly aiding the rebels in mid-1984.

According to several ARDE sources who requested anonymity, Chamorro and others within ARDE began quietly selling the idea to Pastora's field commanders. Rebels from the FDN and FARN made similar contacts.

Pastora allies in Congress did try to pressure the Reagan administration to broaden the aid flow to include Pastora's troops. But CIA operatives on the ground apparently remained convinced that Pastora had to go.

When Pastora, after years of refusal, finally agreed to close ranks with the FDN and UNO, CIA officials refused to go along. Retired Major Gen. John Singlaub, who has served as an administration liaison to the contras since 1984, said he and Pastora signed an agreement March 26 under which Pastora would receive aid in return for moving his forces deeper into Nicaragua and coordinating with UNO.

Asked why the agreement was never carried out, Singlaub said, "Some people feel he's too much of a problem. They decided if he can't fit into their mold, he's no damn good. It reflects amateurism on the part of the handlers."

Meanwhile, in Nicaragua in March, a 120-man FARN unit received at least two airdrops of U.S.-supplied uniforms and boots from a privately contracted cargo plane. The FARN troops shared the supplies with nearby ARDE troops as enticement to dump Pastora.

Still, senior U.S. State Department officials apparently were promising Pastora and his allies that U.S. aid would soon reach them. Alfredo Cesar, a leader of an ARDE-allied group, the Southern Opposition Bloc (BOS), said Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams told him April 8 that BOS "would receive political support and part of the aid" to the rebels if Congress approved President Reagan's request for $100 million in contra aid. Abrams "spoke of a minimum of $5 million," Cesar said. There was no mention made of Pastora's removal.

Cesar relayed Abrams' promise to four of ARDE's five regional commanders and three deputies who already were negotiating an agreement to join FARN.

But the commanders told him CIA operatives were saying just the opposite. "The Americans we've been talking to have said that the only way we will ever receive aid is by signing" an agreement abandoning Pastora.

The commanders went along with what the Americans wanted. "Leonel," as the top ARDE commander was known, explained in a rare interview later that his men "saw that there was no solution with Eden. What were we supposed to do?" He denied, however, that the CIA had pressured them.

Pastora, deserted by all but one of his commanders, announced he was quitting. He charged that the CIA had paid each of the commanders $5,000 for their signatures. FARN officials said they provided the commanders with various sums for personal expenses in San Jose.

Robelo, for one, doubts Pastora's departure will hurt the contra movement.

But there are many who doubt that FARN, led by former Managua Chevrolet salesman and longtime anti-Somoza guerrilla Fernando "El Negro" Chamorro, can regain the military initiative that Pastora's group once had.

Despite receiving a regular flow of U.S. funds in the last nine months, FARN forces have hovered at around 250 combatants after reaching a peak of about 500, officials of the group say. The ARDE troops that recently agreed to join forces with FARN total 1,500 or less, according to knowledgeable rebel sources. Roberto Calderon, the commander of the Sandinista army in the south, said that in recent years, FARN troops simply "have not been active."

And as the CIA assumes a greater role in FARN operations, some longtime rebel supporters are said to be chafing.

Late last month, Singlaub showed up in Costa Rica, announcing that he had come to persuade Pastora to visit Washington.

Singlaub said U.S. officials wanted to offer Pastora a role "much like the role of Charles de Gaulle" coordinating activities of the French resistance from North Africa and London during the Nazi occupation.

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He said Pastora had agreed to make the trip. A Pastora spokesman agreed, but said Pastora would decide what future role he assumes in the movement.

"Nobody made De Gaulle," said Carol Prado. "He made himself."

Wednesday: Taking the war to Managua.

Contras' Twisted Road to Unity

1980 — Former Somoza national guardsmen, led by Col. Enrique Bermudez, form the 15th of September Legion and receive funding from wealthy Nicaraguan exiles. Legion also begins to receive training from Argentine military officers. Renegade Sandinista leader Jose Francisco Cardenal and other civilians organize the Nicaraguan Democratic Union (UDN). A military arm is created under the name Nicaraguan Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARN).

1981 — Argentine officers and CIA sponsor union of UDN and 15th of September Legion. The new group is called the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN). Miskito Indian leader Steadman Fagoth forms a group of Atlantic coast Indians opposed to the Sandinista regime and calls it Misura. Misura forms an alliance with FDN.

1982 — FDN, amid charges of misuse of funds, undergoes major overhaul. Cardenal is ousted. Enrique Bermudez remains head of military arm. Adolfo Calero brought in as member of a new seven-person directorate. The Revolutionary Democratic Alliance (ARDE) is formed in Costa Rica. Its members include Sandinista revolutionary hero Eden Pastora; former Sandinista junta member Alfonso Robelo; Miskito Indian leader Brooklyn Rivera and UDN-FARN leader Fernando "El Negro" Chamorro. ARDE spurns union with FDN because of FDN's ties with national guardsmen.

1984 — ARDE splits into two groups, both called ARDE. Robelo, who favors an alliance with the FDN, heads one faction. Pastora, who opposes the FDN alliance, heads the other.

1985 — United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) is formed in June to channel U.S. aid to the contras. The three leaders are Calero, Robelo and banker and former Sandinista junta member Arturo Cruz. Indians and blacks from the Atlantic Coast region participate through a group called Kisan. Pastora, still unwilling to join any organization involving the FDN, helps form the Southern Opposition Bloc (SOB), which includes his ARDE fighters but does not receive U.S. aid.

1986 — Pastora abandons military fight after his field commanders agree to join FARN, which is UNO-affiliated.